

# A Cambridge

# Parent's

# Guide



to preventing **youth  
substance use &  
promoting well-being**



Cambridge  
Public Health  
Department

 **CHA**  
Cambridge  
Health Alliance



# Dear Parents, Guardians,

# Coaches, and Friends:

**M**iddle school and high school can be an exciting and challenging time for your child—and for parents, guardians, and the other important adults in the child’s life, too. Even though older children might seem to be pulling away and looking for more independence, in reality, they still want to feel like they’re an important part of the family and know that you still love and care for them.

Recent data tell us the majority of Cambridge middle and high school students feel that their parents’ opinion is important to them when deciding whether to try alcohol or other drugs. As a parent or guardian, this may seem like the furthest thing from the truth.

Talking about substance use can be challenging, but we hope the information in this guide can help you start (and continue) those conversations.

This guide was created for parents, guardians, and all adults who work with pre-teens, teens and young adults. It’s full of information to help you make the difference in the life of your loved young one.

These tips are great for learning how to talk with your children about substances like alcohol and marijuana and can also be used to start a conversation about vaping, mental health, sex, and other topics that young people deal with at this stage of life.

**The key is communication: talk early and talk often!**

[ 2 ]

Remember, you are not alone. Your children are part of a strong community of family, friends, neighbors and educators—all of whom they can lean on for support. We have a collective responsibility to ensure all Cambridge children feel safe, healthy, and supported. We’re in this together!

Sincerely,

Cambridge Public Health Department



Want the latest Cambridge health data, tips and info?  
Follow CPHD on Twitter: [@CambHealth](https://twitter.com/CambHealth)

## Why Now?

As your child reaches the end of middle school and makes the transition to high school, plenty of changes are happening. No longer a child, not quite a teen, your student is finding his or her way through things like new classes, new friends, a changing body, and new health challenges.

One of those challenges is the decision whether or not to use alcohol, marijuana, e-cigarettes, or other substances.

Did you know that substance use increases with age? **Among Cambridge Public School students, 9% of 8<sup>th</sup> graders, 15% of 9<sup>th</sup> graders, and 43% of 12<sup>th</sup> graders report they currently drink alcohol.** That means talking with your children early and often about substance use is really important—and that time between middle and high school is an especially important time to have the conversation.

Think your opinion doesn't matter? Think again! According to health survey data, **83% of middle school students and 81% of high school students indicated that their parents' opinion plays a fairly or very important role** in their decision to try alcohol or other drugs.

Making the jump from middle to high school is challenging enough. Talking with your children early and often, helping them plan ways to handle tough situations, and offering positive ways to cope with stress and anxiety can help make that transition easier for everyone.

SOURCES: 2017 CAMBRIDGE MIDDLE GRADES HEALTH SURVEY; 2018 CAMBRIDGE TEEN HEALTH SURVEY  
PHOTO CREDIT: SUZY FEINBERG



“We have found it’s best to have open communication on anything and everything. No subject is off limits. We also do our best to model healthy behaviors at home.”

—Anish, Father of a Cambridge 9<sup>th</sup> Grader & 11<sup>th</sup> Grader

# TRENDS

Among Cambridge High School Students



Current alcohol use, current binge alcohol use, and current use of cigarettes each **decreased** between 2012 and 2016.

---



Current use of marijuana **decreased** in both 2016 and 2018.

---



Current use of electronic cigarettes (e.g., vaping, Juul, etc.) **increased** from 5% in 2016 to 18% in 2018.

SOURCE: 2018 CAMBRIDGE TEEN HEALTH SURVEY

Note: Current use is any use in the 30 days prior to the survey. Binge alcohol use was defined in the survey as having “five or more drinks of alcohol in a row, that is, within a couple of hours.”

[ 4 ]

## What do we mean by “substance use”?

The term substance use can mean different things to different people. For this guide, we consider youth substance use to include:

- Alcohol
- Cocaine
- Cigarettes
- Ecstasy
- Electronic cigarettes, including vaping and Juul
- Heroin
- Marijuana
- Prescription drugs
- Inhalants
- Over-the-counter meds, without a doctor’s prescription

# What To Say: How to Have the Tough Conversations

## 1 Start a conversation with your child.

It can be tough to talk about sensitive topics, no matter how old your child. But talking is important and we all have a responsibility to keep our children safe.

Start by using a news item or a TV or movie storyline as a reference and ask what your child and his/her friends think about the issue. Listen and be respectful. It might be hard for your child to open up if she feels that you already have a right or wrong answer waiting.

**TRY IT:** “It seems like that character wasn’t ready to do X. Is this happening at your school? How do your friends handle situations like this?”

## 2 Set expectations for follow-up

**conversations.** Start talking and keep it going. Talking about substances or other difficult topics means many ongoing conversations. Create space for both of you to talk and let your child do much of the talking. Ask questions that show you’re listening and hearing.

## 3 Be supportive and listen.

You can never tell your child that you love him or her too much. Use that love to open the conversation and let him or her know that you won’t get angry if you are both honest and willing to learn. Don’t jump to conclusions! Try asking your child to walk you through a decision he’s made or will soon be making.

**TRY IT:** “I found this vape pen in your bag. Can we talk about how it got there? What would you do differently next time?”

## 4 Be clear.

Make sure your child knows that you do not approve of him or her using substances. Your opinion matters! Talk about why, including the risks and other positive ways to cope with stress or anxiety.

## 5 Set rules and follow through.

Talk about and agree on rules, like curfew and privacy. Once agreed upon, these need to be respected by both you and your child. If the rules are broken, follow through with a reasonable punishment. Punishments that are too harsh can undermine your relationship and progress.

**TRY IT:** “What do you think is a reasonable curfew? What should happen if you’re not home on time?”

## 6 Create a safe word.

Many parents use a safe word or phrase that a child can use while they’re out with their peers. Texting or saying it over the phone lets you know that he or she needs your help getting out of a tough situation.

**TRY IT:** “The dance is coming up, and I know you’re planning on hanging out at [friend]’s house after. If you ever feel uncomfortable, just text me “X” and I’ll come pick you up, no questions asked.”

## 7 Get social.

Learn which social networks and apps your child uses. Be clear about what is off limits when it comes to using technology, and make it clear that you will keep tabs on their activity—and make sure you actually do.

SOURCE: DRUGFREE.ORG

# Say This, Not That!

Here are words to avoid when talking with your child about alcohol and other substances—and words you can use instead.

AVOID	USE
[BAD] Smoking pot is <b>bad</b> for you.	[HARMFUL] Smoking pot is <b>harmful</b> to your health and brain.
[STUPID] Drinking alcohol is a <b>stupid</b> idea.	[UNHEALTHY] Drinking is <b>unhealthy</b> for teens, and that's why I'm concerned.
[DISAPPROVE] I <b>disapprove</b> of you hanging out with that group of friends.	[CONCERNED] I'm <b>concerned</b> about your new group of friends and worry that they may not be the best influence.
[DISAPPOINTED] I am <b>disappointed</b> in you for smoking pot.	[WORRIED] I'm <b>worried</b> about your decision to smoke pot. When's a good time to talk about it?

ADAPTED FROM: PARTNERSHIP FOR DRUG-FREE KIDS

[ 6 ]



## To share or not to share...?

Parents sometimes feel hypocritical hiding their own experiences. If your child asks if you've ever tried alcohol or drugs, you can choose to keep your experiences private (not everything in your history needs to be available) or to share them, but don't reminisce or glamorize your experiences. You can also explain that as a parent, it's your job to help them avoid things they will regret, and substance use definitely increases the chances of doing something they might regret.

SOURCE: CHILD MIND INSTITUTE

# What To Do: Actions You Can Take

My child doesn't drink or use drugs, right...? Actually, some do, and **most high school students in Cambridge think it would be "sort of easy" or "very easy" to get alcohol from home.**

While most parents don't willingly give their children alcohol, prescription drugs, or other substances, anything not locked up is easy for most children to find, consume, and share.

Here are a few things you can do:

- 1 Monitor the alcohol you have at home. Know how much you have and where you keep it.
- 2 Don't forget about prescription drugs. Consider locking these up or keeping track of how many pills you have.
- 3 Safely store marijuana products in a child-resistant container and lock them away.
- 4 Be a good role model. Demonstrate positive behaviors by not using substances around your children or driving under the influence.



## Did you know?

The Cambridge Public Health Department offers monthly 21 Proof trainings for owners and managers of Cambridge bars and restaurants licensed to pour alcohol. This training helps reduce underage drinking in Cambridge and encourages responsible alcohol sales.

## TEEN PERCEPTIONS

Percentage of Cambridge 12<sup>th</sup> graders who think it would be **easy or very easy** to get alcohol from:



Liquor store, bar, or restaurant

24%



Home

55%



Adult 21 years or older

57%



Someone less than 21 years old

50%

SOURCE: 2018 CAMBRIDGE TEEN HEALTH SURVEY

# Social Host Liability

If you think it's safe to have your children and their friends drinking in your home, you might want to think again. In Massachusetts, parents and their children may face:

## Criminal Prosecution

Parents can receive criminal penalties—as much as a \$2,000 fine and a year of jail time—for knowingly giving alcohol to an underage person, other than their children or grandchildren, in their home. Your child can also face these criminal penalties for giving alcohol to an underage friend in the family home.

SOURCE: KATHARINE M. FELLUCA, ATTORNEY AT THE LAW FIRM OF CLARK, HUNT, AHERN & EMBRY IN CAMBRIDGE

## Civil Lawsuit

If you host a social gathering and give too much alcohol to a guest (whether they're underage or not) and that person harms someone else as a result (like getting behind the wheel and causing an accident, for instance), you can be sued for a potentially huge sum of money to compensate the victim or the victim's family, if that person was killed. Your child can face this social host liability as well.



“Our family conversations about substance use started from lessons our kids were learning in middle school, events in the news, or things they were hearing from friends. Now that they're getting older, the discussions have shifted more towards the challenges of standing their ground when others make different choices.”

—Michele, Parent of a Cambridge 9<sup>th</sup> grader & 11<sup>th</sup> Grader

PHOTO CREDIT: SUZY FEINBERG



## SPOTLIGHT: MENTAL HEALTH & WELLNESS

---

Mental health, much like physical health, can range from good to poor and can also change over time. Our mental health affects how we think, feel, and act. It also helps determine how we handle stress, relate to others, and make choices.

In Cambridge, the top five things middle school students report worrying about most are:

### TOP 5 WORRIES

- 1 Poor grades
- 2 MCAS
- 3 Weight
- 4 Arguing at home
- 5 Social status

---

### What can I do? How can I help?

Our role as parents, guardians, and other adults who work with teens is to help them establish healthy ways to cope with stress.

Start by having a conversation with your child. If you've noticed a recent change in behavior, talk about your observations and concerns, listen respectfully when your child talks, and be mindful of the amount of stress your child is experiencing. If you are concerned, visit [nami.org](https://nami.org) to learn how you can support your child's mental health.

SOURCE: 2017 CAMBRIDGE MIDDLE GRADES HEALTH SURVEY



### WELLNESS TIPS FOR TEENS & PRE-TEENS

- Avoid alcohol and other drugs. These can become addictive and add more stress in the long run.
- Avoid caffeine and products high in sugar.
- Eat three healthy, balanced meals a day.
- Get plenty of sleep. It helps to be well-rested.
- Exercise regularly. Even just 15 minutes per day can help.
- Limit screen time, particularly on social media.
- Ask for help. Sometimes just talking about what stresses you out can be beneficial. You don't have to face everything on your own.

# Resources

## Massachusetts Substance Use Helpline

[www.helplinema.org](http://www.helplinema.org)

1-800-327-5050

---

## More about MJ

[www.moreaboutmj.org](http://www.moreaboutmj.org)

*Massachusetts-specific facts about marijuana.*

---

## Partnership for Drug-Free Kids

[www.drugfree.org](http://www.drugfree.org)

---

## Above the Influence

[www.abovetheinfluence.com](http://www.abovetheinfluence.com)

*A campaign through Partnership for Drug-Free Kids for teens.*

---

## Truth Initiative

[www.truthinitiative.org](http://www.truthinitiative.org)

[www.thisisquitting.com](http://www.thisisquitting.com)

*Support for youth to quit vaping/Juuling.*

[www.becomeanex.org](http://www.becomeanex.org)

*Support to quit smoking cigarettes.*

---

## National Alliance for Mental Illness (NAMI)

[www.nami.org](http://www.nami.org)

1-800-950-6264



Cambridge  
Public Health  
Department

 **CHA**  
Cambridge  
Health Alliance



Cambridge Public Health Department is a city department administered by Cambridge Health Alliance, a regional health care delivery system.

**119 Windsor Street | Cambridge, MA 02139 | 617-665-3800**  
**[cambridgepublichealth.org](http://cambridgepublichealth.org) | [@CambHealth](https://twitter.com/CambHealth)**